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ABSTRACT

The research orientations and perspectives of people participating in the international dialogue about the redefinition of English language studies have been varied. Two broad and overlapping areas are distinctive to English studies: the exploration of human values and experience through the study of literature and the media, and the development of the capacity to explore values and experience through learning to create literary and media pieces of one's own. A commitment to both is a commitment to teaching children how to deal with experience in distinctive ways, ways of meaning realized in characteristic patterns of discourse. Once suggested to be a "contentless" subject, English does--in fact--have a content that involves the various ways in which our English-speaking traditions take experiences, real and imagined, and shape meanings of them in language. It is language as art that is the distinctive feature of English studies. An investigation of a varied range of literary forms encourages students to learn a number of ways to make meanings. Furthermore, to enter with increasing knowledge and understanding into the ways of meaning valued in a culture is part of the process of learning to operate with independence in that culture. The most important implication for English teachers, therefore, is to be conscious of the nature of discourse patterns that give distinctive character to the various forms or genres of English literature. Only when teachers focus with interest and real understanding on the nature of these, will they be able to guide their children in writing the various literary forms available to them. (EL)

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International perspectives on new models for English teaching: an Australian perspective.

A paper presented in a session devoted to International Perspectives on New Models for English Teaching, at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, held Detroit, November 16-21, 1984.

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Those of us involved with the teaching of English at any level would normally describe ourselves as concerned with the development of individuals, and with what we would argue is the particular or distinctive contribution of English studies to the development of individuals. Most of us participating in this session -- certainly those of us at least who have been asked to speak at it -- have in varying ways participated in the international interest in the redefinition of English language studies which dates from the '60's.

The international dialogue about the redefinition of English language studies has been contributed to by many people in all English speaking countries -- linguists, psycholinguists, psychologists, sociolinguists, and specialists in the teaching of English. The research orientations and perspectives of such a diverse group of people have of course been very varied, and in a number of significant ways they have often disagreed among themselves. Nonetheless, there have been other ways in which such researchers have held a great deal in common, and they have thus contributed to contemporary views about the significance and role of language in learning.

The concern with language in contemporary educational discussion, I suggest, is primarily a concern with language as an instrument or a resource : a resource that is, with which persons build relationships, negotiate meanings and understandings, achieve a sense of personal identity -- a resource in short, with which people construct a sense of their world and hence with which they learn. Viewed in these terms it will be clear that language has a fundamental role in learning in all areas of the curriculum, not uniquely in the traditional English studies -- primary language arts, and secondary school subject 'English'. In fact, I draw what I consider to be a crucial distinction between language education and education in the English studies. I regard myself as a specialist in both, though for the most part I shall confine myself here to considerations to do with the teaching of subject 'English'. All teachers in my view should see themselves as involved in language education, regardless of the age group of the students, or of the content area or school subject being taught, while only some teachers have a specialist interest in the subject 'English'.

School studies, whether they be familiar areas of the curriculum such as history or mathematics, or whether they be other less traditional areas of enquiry, as, for example those 'child-centred studies' negotiated between students and teachers, all represent particular and distinctive ways of dealing with experience and information. Their distinctive ways find expression in particular patterns of discourse. Thus, the concerns of history, for example, are with defining and answering

questions about some aspect of the evolution and development of human societies and their ideologies. Such concerns necessarily differ from those, say, of mathematics, in which the interest is in dealing with formal systems of numbers and symbols, and their manipulation for counting, as well as for calculating size space and time. Such concerns differ again from those, say, of biology, of physics, of legal studies, of English studies, and so on. Al the areas of enquiry I have thus quickly alluded to represent different ways of knowing or of meaning -- different ways of dealing with experience of concern and value to human beings. Their differences, I would stress, are actually apparent in the various patterns of working associated with each, including the patterns of using language.

Education in general is concerned with the development of children's abilities. Language education is concerned with the development of children's abilities in language, where that implies development of the abilities to interpret and create the discourses relevant to the various subjects or content areas children need to study as part of their schooling.

What then, are we to say about the particular role of English studies in the curriculum? What are we to say about the kinds of models for English teaching we might want to develop in the mid 1980's? In particular, what are we to say of the patterns of discourse-- the ways of meaning and of knowing -- we would consider distinctive to English studies, and therefore to be prized in our dealings with those whom we teach English at whatever level of schooling?

I began this short talk by noting that those of us involved with the teaching of English probably attach particular significance to the contribution of English studies to the development of persons as individuals. A commitment to the value and worth of individuals is a familiar theme among specialists in English teaching. I would myself argue that all school studies can contribute to the development of individuals, and that a concern for the development of individuals of confidence and independence has in fact always been part of the Western tradition of education, having consequences for a view of the relevance of all areas of enquiry. Assuming we all grant this general proposition, the question still remains: what is the particular contribution of English studies to the development of persons?

There are, I suggest, two broad and overlapping areas of emphasis distinctive to English studies. They are:

(i) the exploration of human values and experience (both real and imagined) through the study of literature and the media, film and television in particular;

(ii) the development of the capacity to explore values and experience (real and imagined) through learning to create literary and media pieces of one's own.

The two are overlapping, as I noted, for the reading and discussion involved in the first necessarily feed into the writing and discussion involved in the second, and vice versa. I have stated my two broad areas of emphasis in English studies with some care. I want to suggest (i) that a commitment to both is a commitment to teaching children how to deal with experience in quite distinctive ways,

(ii) that these ways may be thought of as ways of meaning, and

(iii) that such ways of meaning will be realised in characteristic patterns of discourse.

Some years ago -- in the late 1960's in fact, -- it became a commonplace to suggest that English, unlike other subjects was 'contentless': that its concerns were so comprehensively with the development of persons, and with the range of feelings, values, attitudes, and experiences that they might explore, that it was impossible, even inappropriate to attempt any definition of 'English' at all. Such a position seems to me to be not very helpful, and in fact quite seriously misguided. It is unhelpful because it fails to make clear to teachers what matters might usefully constitute aspects of the English program. It is misguided because it fails to acknowledge that there are ways of dealing with experience, attitudes, feelings and values which are distinctive to literary and media concerns: it is these ways which constitute the patterns of discourse, spoken and written, particular to English studies.

The point can be immediately demonstrated by reference to some quick examples. Consider the emotions of grief or joy, compassion or hatred, and consider further the kinds of experiences, real-life or fictional, in which such emotions might be felt. These things -- the range of emotions and the experiences which aroused them -- are frequently the concerns of literature: to read about them, or to see them portrayed in theatre or film is to be touched and enriched by them. To write about them is to learn to deal with them by being articulate about them. In these senses we may say that emotions and experience are the subject of enquiry in literary studies.

However, they are also the subject of enquiry in other areas of human endeavour. In varying ways human passion and experience concern biologists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and so on. Yet rarely does one confuse the discourse constructed by any of these specialists with the discourse of literature or theatre, or indeed of discussion about literature and theatre.

There is a very good reason for this. Those who create literature deal with experiences and emotions in ways which differ fundamentally from those of the other people I just identified: their purposes are different, as are the kinds of understandings they intend to develop. These differences are apparent in the ways of working and in the associated patterns of discourse of each. It is these ways of working, and these patterns of creating discourse which students actually learn in studying different subjects in schools.

English then, does have a 'content', just as other areas of enquiry found in schools may be said to have a 'content'. Its content involves the various ways in which in our English-speaking traditions we take experiences, real and imagined, and shape meanings of them in language. It is language as art which is the distinctive feature of English studies. More than in any other area of schooling, I suggest, it is language itself which becomes the overt object of enquiry in English studies.

I want to be careful about what is meant by the latter observation. Much traditional teaching dating from the nineteenth century at least, has tended to focus upon a particular and I believe very unhelpful view of what is involved in teaching and learning about language. I refer to the practices, by no means dead yet in Australia, by which children study traditional school grammar with its emphasis upon parts of speech, and the rules of syntax -- the various do's and don't's of how to construct English sentences.

Such practices have very limited value. The ability to recognise a part of speech, for example, doesn't in itself improve one's capacity to use it properly, while the rules of syntax relate only to written English sentences. Such rules throw no useful light upon the study of spoken language, and they also contribute little of value to one's understandings of the relationships between sentences. Above all, the traditional grammar studies have nothing useful to say about the larger unit which is the text, and that is because traditional school grammar is not concerned with meaning.

A serious interest in <u>meaning</u> and in <u>how</u> a text is patterned to realise the particular meanings it creates, is, I suggest, the proper concern of English studies. It is the investigation of the many literary forms or genres, and of the ways

meanings are shaped or patterned in these which gives to English studies their distinctive character. The interest in language as something patterned for delight and pleasure begins very early in life, as Hasan (1985) has recently demonstrated in examining the functions of children's nursery rhymes. The early enjoyment in the ways in which language is fashioned in nursery and street rhymes, Hasan suggests, is an interest in language as 'verbal art'. It is an interest which schools may extend and enrich, provided the English programs offered are imaginative and challenging enough.

Even in their early reading experiences once children enter school, they begin to enter into an understanding of some of the most enduring literary forms in our culture -- the numerous narrative forms which are a familiar feature of many young children's story books. Subsequent schooling throughout the years of primary and secondary education should seek to focus upon as varied a range of forms as possible, enabling children to explore these, both in their reading and in their writing activities.

I argued earlier that the various subject areas represent differing ways of dealing with experience and information -- different ways of meaning and of knowing. I would argue that in English, when we deliberately open up to investigation a varied range of literary forms, we are actually encouraging those whom we teach to learn a number of important ways to make meanings, all of them significant and valuable as part of our cultural traditions.

To enter with increasing knowledge and understanding into the ways of meaning valued in one's culture I would argue is part of the process of learning to operate with independence in that culture. It is in this sense that English studies can make a very important contribution to the development of persons as individuals. As children learn to interpret and create the various literary and artistic forms available to them, entering with confidence and pleasure into the many sorts of experiences, emotions, attitudes, ideas and values they unlock, so too, they learn to become increasingly successful participants in their sociocultural contexts. It is through successful participation in one's culture, actively using its ways of meanings to deal with experience and ideas, that persons define and create their individuality.

What then, are the implications for teachers of the kind of model of English teaching I have thus so quickly sketched? It seems to me that the most important implication is that teachers of English and language arts become critically conscious of, and alive to, the nature of the discourse patterns which give distinctive character to the various forms or genres of English literature in

particular. Only when teachers enter with interest and real understanding into the nature of these, will they be able to guide their children in reading and writing the various literary forms available to them.

Whether I am arguing for a new model of English teaching, or for the reaffirmation of a much older one is perhaps a matter of opinion. However, what is new about the current context, consequent upon the attempts to redefine English language studies to which I earlier referred, is a greatly enhanced capacity to understand the nature of language itself, particularly in its character as a resource with which we structure and shape meaning. Form and meaning are not independent of each other: literary forms have the character they do because they deal with certain kinds of meanings, not others. Equipped with this understanding, we English teachers can move our children away from the reasonably arid pursuit of parts of speech and syntax which have continued to mar so much teaching practice, towards a more lively and vital model of English teaching: one that is, in which the concern is with the patterns of language through which meanings are made.

References

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